

# **Brand Building for a Product That Nobody Wants to Buy - Unveiling the Extraordinary Transformation in the Tire Industry: A Case Study of Pirelli**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Tires, the unassuming black, rounded products with a hole in the middle, epitomize one of the most mundane and low-involvement commodities, notorious for a lacklustre purchasing experience. It is akin to selling headaches – expensive, time-consuming, unpredictable, and unpleasant. Yet, mastering the art of selling tires suggests an ability to sell anything. In this article, we embark on an exploration of the remarkable brand evolution within the tire industry. We unravel the extraordinary journey of Pirelli, which defied expectations, rising to become one of the most iconic, globally recognized, and even sexiest brands.

This journey is revealed by reviewing case studies from real activations in the past and recent years on Pirelli's evolution from a tire manufacturer to a prestigious luxury brand, showcasing the profound impact of emotional branding and customer experience in reshaping a product. As a result, the reader should have a glimpse of how emotional branding leads to consumer loyalty and achieves substantial financial success. Pirelli's triumph provides invaluable insights for enterprises aiming to elevate their brands beyond core products, underscoring the crucial role of emotions and experiences in contemporary marketing approaches. The strategies and innovations embraced by Pirelli offer an inspirational blueprint for transforming a basic product into a globally coveted, luxury-driven brand that thrives on emotions.

**Keywords:** Emotional Branding, Brand Equity, Brand Loyalty, Marketing, Tire, Sponsorship, Partnership, Co-branding

## **Introduction**

This study aims to provide real-life examples of emotional branding, offering valuable insights into the tire industry's ongoing revolution. The showcased activities are recent and not widely covered in mainstream media, providing a fresh perspective. One of the authors has over a decade of experience in the tire industry, overseeing operations in more than 70 countries and

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gaining insights from three major industry giants: Michelin, Goodyear, and Pirelli. The other author, a marketing professor, has always been intrigued by tire brands as exemplary cases. We believe that this unique combination of industry expertise and academic perspective contributes to a comprehensive and insightful study that bridges both theoretical and practical aspects.

The article delves into the evolution and impact of emotional branding, a phenomenon that has reshaped strategies across various industries, with a specific focus on the tire industry. Following a brief literature review on emotional branding, the article traces Pirelli's journey, shedding light on its recent and engaging activations. Our goal is to provide a captivating glimpse into the unconventional branding strategies employed by this industry giant, particularly emphasizing its non-industry-related initiatives and steering clear of conventional sponsorships. These examples illustrate how tire manufacturers have ingeniously extended their brand identities beyond their primary products, offering a nuanced understanding of their branding strategies.

## **2. The Increasing Role of Emotional Branding**

The foundational concepts of emotional branding, as articulated by key scholars such as Travis (2000), Gobe (2001), Roberts (2004), Kim and Sullivan (2009), Khairi, Setiawan, Mansoor (2022), and others, serve as the framework for understanding the profound shift from analytical, product-based approaches to emotionally driven consumer connections.

Travis (2000) posits that a brand transcends its mere physical attributes and becomes significant to consumers only when an emotional connection is established. This sentiment is echoed by Gobe (2001), the author of the groundbreaking book, "Emotional Branding," who emphasizes the importance of "Emotions Share" and mindshare over market share, asserting that brands should embody love, positive experiences, and foster a bond reminiscent of human relationships.

Roberts (2004) introduces the concept of emotional branding as a consumer-centric, relational, and story-driven approach to cultivating enduring bonds between customers and brands. He proposes the idea that brands should aspire to become "love marks," entities not just respected but genuinely loved by customers. Compelling consumer-brand linkages, as suggested by Atkin (2005), emerge when branding strategies resonate with customers' inspirations, aspirations, and life circumstances, fostering a sense of community among brand users. Kim and Sullivan (2009) underscore the role of emotional branding in addressing the challenge of brand differentiation, especially in the face of increasingly apathetic consumers. According to Khairi, Setiawan, and Mansoor (2022), emotional branding, based on the four pillars of relationships, sensory experiences, imagination, and vision, serves as a powerful strategy to engage customers and meet their desire for emotional connections with brands.

The shift in consumer behaviour is evident, highlighted by Jindal, Jindal, Chavan (2023), moving away from analytical assessments of product features towards a desire for emotional ties with brands. Marketers, as noted by Arundathi, Ganesh, Gokula (2023), achieve this by creating content that resonates with consumers' emotional states, egos, needs, and aspirations.

In the hypermodern society characterized by continuous interactions and facilitated access to information, brands need to redefine themselves. Montaguti and Lelis (2017) illustrate that successful brands have navigated this landscape by providing engaging and meaningful experiences and stories. In this context, customer loyalty, trust, and commitment are essential, emphasizing the transformative power of emotional branding.

In conclusion, as brands evolve in response to the dynamic landscape of consumer expectations, emotional branding emerges as a crucial strategy. This article presents a comprehensive overview of the evolution, principles, and impact of emotional branding, shedding light on its role in building lasting and meaningful connections between consumers and brands, with a focus on the distinctive field of the tire industry.

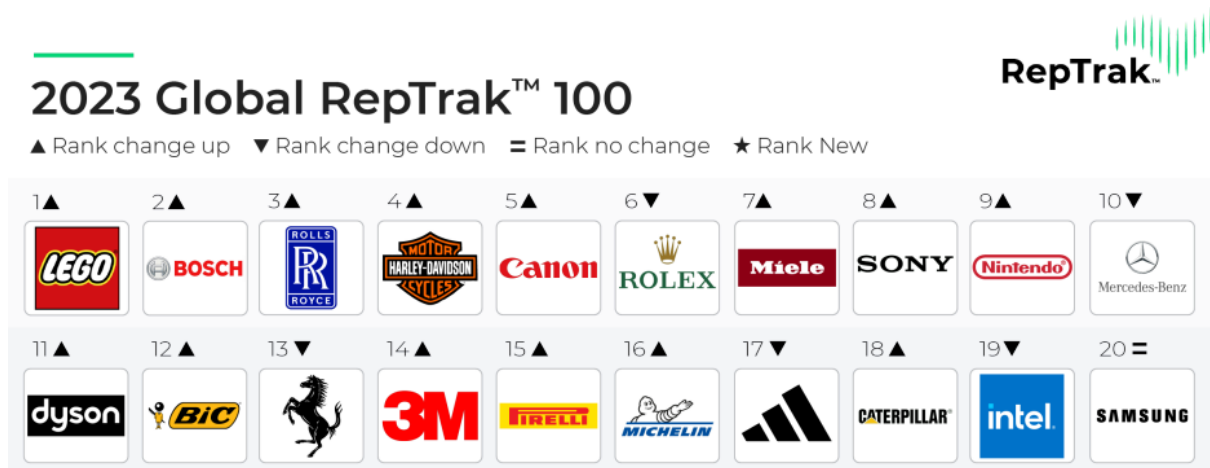
### **3. The Role of Emotion and Branding in the Tire Industry**

In contemporary marketing strategies, there is a crucial emphasis on tapping into consumer emotions and crafting a distinctive brand experience. This holds especially true for products with inherently functional purposes, such as tires. Pirelli, a frontrunner in the premium and prestige tire segment, serves as a noteworthy example of how a successful brand experience can be cultivated even for a product traditionally perceived as lacking strong emotional connections. As depicted in Illustration 1, the tire industry's most iconic brands have managed to attain some of the highest reputations among globally recognized brands.

Tires, often relegated to the realm of mundane and utilitarian products, bear a resemblance to the perceived inevitability and inconvenience associated with a visit to the dentist. Overcoming this perception poses a significant challenge for tire companies aiming to establish brand loyalty and evoke emotional resonance with consumers. However, as highlighted in Illustration 2, prominent tire manufacturers like Pirelli consistently generate substantial revenues, surpassing those of renowned car brands such as Ferrari, Lamborghini, and McLaren. Moreover, delving into the emotional aspect of branding within the tire industry opens up opportunities for companies to differentiate themselves and foster lasting connections with consumers. Despite the utilitarian nature of tires, successful brands in this sector have managed to transcend the functional stereotype and create a brand narrative that resonates on a deeper emotional level. This phenomenon challenges the conventional notion that emotional branding is exclusively reserved for products traditionally associated with strong emotional ties.

In conclusion, the tire industry provides a unique landscape where the fusion of emotion and branding plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer perceptions and fostering brand loyalty. Pirelli and other leading tire manufacturers serve as exemplars of how effective emotional branding can transform a seemingly mundane product into one that elicits consumer loyalty and achieves financial success, surpassing even the revenues of esteemed car brands.

Illustration 1: 2023 Global Reptrak report



Source: <https://www.reptrak.com/rankings/#ranking-list>

Illustration 2: Top Tire Manufacturers in the World

Company	Head Quarter	Revenue	Product Range
1. <b>BRIDGESTONE</b> Your Journey, Our Passion Bridgestone Corp.	Tokyo, Japan	USD 27.22 billion	Passenger Car & Light Truck Tires, Truck Tires (Radial & Bias), Speciality Tires (Earth Movers, Agriculture, Two Wheelers, Aircraft)
2. <b>MICHELIN</b> Michelin SCA	Clermont-Ferrand, France	USD 25.40 billion	Consumer (Passenger, SUV) Commercial Tires (Van, Truck and Bus), Off The Road Tires, Aircraft Tires and Air Free Concept (Non-Pneumatic) Tire
3. <b>GOODYEAR</b> Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co.	Akron, Ohio, U.S.	USD 15.37 billion	Aviation Tires, Commercial Truck Tires, Off-the-road Tires, Racing Tires and RV tires

Source: <https://www.marketresearchreports.com/blog/2018/07/05/worlds-15-largest-tire-manufacturers-revenue>

#### 4. The Case Study of Pirelli

Pirelli, founded in Milan in 1872, stands today as a global brand renowned for cutting-edge technology, high-end production excellence, and a passion for innovation deeply rooted in its Italian heritage. Operating across 18 production plants in 12 countries and maintaining a commercial presence in over 160, Pirelli boasts approximately 31,300 employees and reported a turnover of around 6.6 billion euros in 2022. It holds a distinguished position as one of the world's major producers of tires and associated services, uniquely focused solely on the Consumer tire market, encompassing products for cars, motorcycles, and bicycles. With a history spanning over 150 years, Pirelli has transformed its brand identity from a mere tire manufacturer to a symbol of luxury and innovation. This transformation is primarily attributed

to its strategic branding initiatives and consumer engagement tactics. Pirelli's association with motorsports, particularly as the exclusive tire supplier for Formula 1 and the World Rally Championship, has significantly bolstered its brand image. This involvement in high-stakes, high-visibility events align the brand with qualities of performance, endurance, and technological advancement. As demonstrated with Illustration 3, Pirelli partnered iconic brand Prada for winning the oldest trophy in sport history. With a legacy spanning over 150 years, Pirelli has transcended its identity as a mere tire manufacturer, evolving into a symbol of luxury and innovation. This transformation is primarily credited to strategic branding initiatives and consumer engagement tactics. Pirelli's deep involvement in motorsports, serving as the exclusive tire supplier for Formula 1 and the World Rally Championship, has significantly fortified its brand image. This participation in high-stakes, high-visibility events aligns the brand with qualities of performance, endurance, and technological advancement, exemplified by its collaboration with the iconic brand Prada, as illustrated in Illustration 3, resulting in the acquisition of the oldest trophy in sports history. Source: Pirelli.com (2024)

**Illustration 3: Luna Rossa**



Source: <https://www.lunarossachallenge.com/>

Pirelli's success extends beyond the quality of its products; it is rooted in its distinctive brand communication and experience-based marketing strategy. The company has creatively leveraged its rubber expertise to forge collaborations in diverse sectors. As depicted in Illustration 4, the partnership with Blossoms skis, part of the 'Pirelli Design' project, led to the creation of the Sport Carve Ski with an anti-vibration rubber layer designed in Pirelli laboratories. This innovative approach, incorporating rubber to reduce ski vibration, underscores Pirelli's commitment to diversifying its brand presence. Similarly, collaborations with PUMA for shoe soles and other luxury brands for unique products like speakers and furniture made from F1 tire replicas showcase Pirelli's dedication to expanding its brand influence.

#### Illustration 4: Blossom skis



Source: <https://www.pirellidesign.com/en-ww/sport-speed/blossom-skis.html>

The company has established numerous innovative partnerships across various industries, including sportswear, fashion, and luxury goods. Additionally, Piorelli employs distinctive marketing tools such as the Piorelli calendar, which transports consumers into the world of fashion and culture without directly foregrounding its products. As you can see on Illustration 5, Piorelli Calendar turns 60 years in 2024 that demonstrates the long-lasting journey of this beautiful piece of art. The company has forged numerous innovative partnerships across various industries, including sportswear, fashion, and luxury goods. Additionally, Piorelli employs distinctive marketing tools such as the Piorelli calendar, which, as illustrated in Figure 3, celebrates its 60th anniversary in 2024, symbolizing the enduring journey of this beautiful piece of art that transports consumers into the realms of fashion and culture without overtly foregrounding its products.

#### Illustration: 5 The Cal

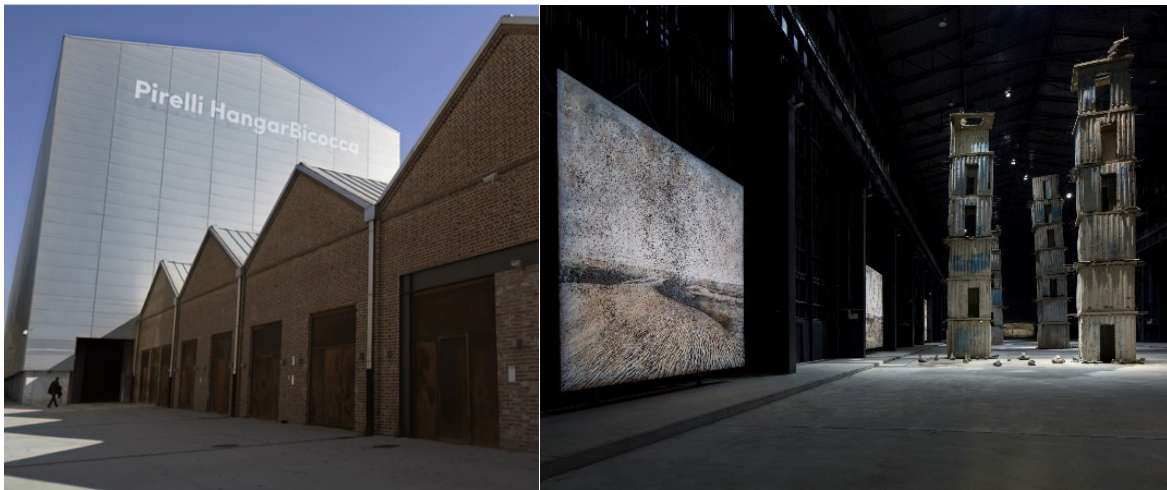


Source: <https://pirellicalendar.pirelli.com/en/home>

Similarly, Pirelli's visionary conversion of a warehouse into the Hangar Bicocca art centre stands as a testament to the brand's commitment to reinforcing its unique identity. Established in 2004, Pirelli Hangar Bicocca, a non-profit foundation entirely supported by Pirelli, has ingeniously transformed a former industrial plant in Milan into an institution dedicated to the production and promotion of contemporary art.

As vividly depicted in Illustration 6, this dynamic centre for experimentation and research sprawls across 15,000 square meters, making it not just a gallery but one of the largest contiguous exhibition spaces in Europe. Hosting major solo shows annually, featuring works by both Italian and international artists, each project is meticulously designed to harmonize with the architectural intricacies of the complex. The exploration is deepened through a calendar of parallel events, offering the public an opportunity for free admission, with facilitators on hand to foster a meaningful connection with the exhibited art.

**Illustration 6: Hangar Bicocca**



*Source: <https://pirellihangarbicocca.org/en/>*

Pirelli's strategic partnerships with luxury brands, as exemplified by the collaboration with Montblanc, where selected shops underwent a rebranding infused with the Pirelli image, underline the brand's upscale positioning. These collaborations transcend the traditional boundaries of tire manufacturing, serving as a showcase of Pirelli's unwavering commitment to innovation, manufacturing excellence, and creative design. As eloquently illustrated in Illustration 7, the exclusive series produced in collaboration with Pirelli Design aims not merely for uniqueness but to craft products that are iconic and one-of-a-kind. In this instance, the choice of Montblanc signifies excellence in craftsmanship and design, symbolizing sophisticated style, performance, and quality.

### Illustration 7: Montblanc trolley



Source: <https://www.pirellicompany.com/en-ww/travel-accessories/montblanc.html>

The P Zero World stores, revolutionize the mundane tire shopping into a unique customer experience. These shops serve as a physical embodiment of Pirelli's brand values and an immersive platform for customer engagement. As shown on Illustration 8, P Zero World is a byword for a tire shop concept extraordinaire, which concentrates in particular on products and services for the Premium and Prestige segments. The special feature of P Zero World is the unique combination of first-class product and service quality, professional expert service and an elegant and very comfortable ambience that makes every visit a real experience for customers.

With its strategy based on the Perfect Fit philosophy, the Italian tire manufacturer evolved into a world-leading OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) for cars of the Premium and Prestige segments. The approach: in close cooperation with the engineers of renowned automotive manufacturers, the engineers of Pirelli develop individual tailor-made original equipment tires for each individual vehicle model of a manufacturer.

The P Zero World stores, featured in Illustration 8, redefine the conventional tire shopping experience, going beyond being a mere point of sale to embody Pirelli's brand values and create an immersive platform for customer engagement. Positioned as an extraordinary concept for tire shops, P Zero World focuses specifically on products and services tailored for the Premium and Prestige segments. What sets P Zero World apart is its distinctive combination of first-class product and service quality, professional expert service, and an ambience that effortlessly blends elegance with comfort. Every visit to P Zero World becomes a genuine experience for customers, aligning with Pirelli's strategy based on the Perfect Fit philosophy. This approach has propelled the Italian tire manufacturer to the forefront as a world-leading OEM for cars in the Premium and Prestige segments. The strategy involves close cooperation between Pirelli's engineers and those of renowned automotive manufacturers, resulting in the development of tailor-made original equipment tires for each vehicle model.



### Illustration 8: P Zero World

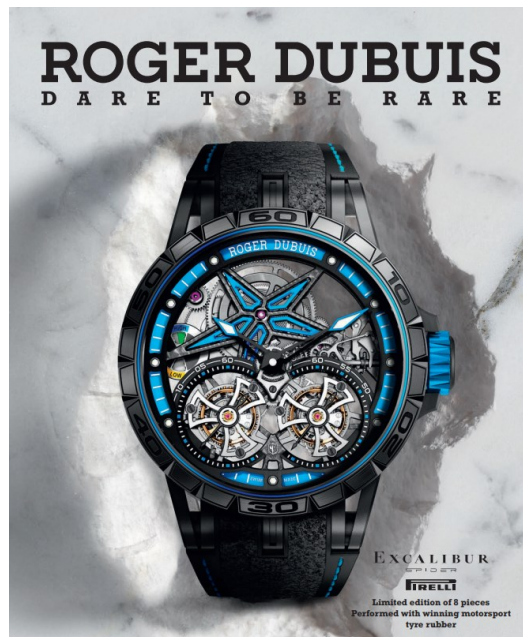


Source: <https://pzeroworld.pirelli.com/en-ww/pirelli-design>

The brand's luxury co-branding activities include the watch with straps featuring rubber inlays from certified Pirelli winning motorsport tires having competed in real races – and adorned with legendary tread motifs reproducing the profile of a Pirelli Cinturato intermediate tire, produced by Roger Dubuis, further reinforce Pirelli's premium image. As Illustration 9 demonstrates, Roger Dubuis took the fast track with the big reveal of its brand-new alliance with Pirelli, a perfect match on all key levels and a kindred spirit in delivering money can't buy experiences. A stunning embodiment of what can happen when visionary engineers meet incredible watchmakers. This luxury alliance between two partners who have long since grasped the fact that exclusive service leaves a lasting imprint on hearts and minds – as well as on racing tracks and connoisseurs' wrists.

The brand's foray into luxury co-branding extends to watches, featuring straps adorned with rubber inlays from certified Pirelli winning motorsport tires that have triumphed in real races. Additionally, these watches are embellished with legendary tread motifs replicating the profile of a Pirelli Cinturato intermediate tire. Produced by Roger Dubuis, this collaboration further solidifies Pirelli's premium image, as highlighted in Illustration 9. Roger Dubuis took the fast track in unveiling its new alliance with Pirelli, illustrating a perfect match on all key levels and a shared commitment to delivering unparalleled, exclusive experiences. This luxury alliance brings together visionary engineers and incredible watchmakers, acknowledging the profound impact of exclusive service not only on racing tracks but also on the hearts, minds, and wrists of connoisseurs.

### Illustration 9: Roger Dubuis



*Source: <https://www.pirelli.com/global/en-ww/life/lifestyle/design/excalibur-spider-pirelli-the-roger-dubuis-watch-that-brings-the-thrills-of-motor-sports-to-life-53493/>*

The P Zero Experience, an exclusive track day event, presents a comprehensive 360° Pirelli brand experience on some of the world's most renowned tracks, including the Mugello Circuit in Italy, the Red Bull Ring in Austria, the Silverstone Circuit in the UK, the Yas Marina Circuit in the UAE (United Arab Emirates), and many others. This event, tailored for supercar owners, allows them to immerse themselves in the high-octane driving emotions associated with Pirelli. As it can be seen in Illustration 10, the Pirelli-centric experience is curated in a sleek and tailored atmosphere, embodying the brand's image and cutting-edge technology. Guests not only partake in the thrill of the track but also have the opportunity to relax and be entertained within the exclusive 'Pirelli Lounge.'

## Illustration 10: P Zero Experience



Source: <https://pzeroexperience.pirelli.com/>

### 5. Discussion

The case study of Pirelli aligns with the foundational concepts of emotional branding discussed in the literature review. Pirelli's brand evolution from a traditional tire manufacturer to a symbol of luxury and innovation reflects the transformative power of emotional branding.

#### 1. Establishing Emotional Connections:

Travis (2000) posits that brands gain significance when an emotional connection is established. Pirelli's strategic branding initiatives, particularly its deep involvement in motorsports as the exclusive tire supplier for Formula 1 and the World Rally Championship, align the brand with qualities of performance, endurance, and technological advancement. The collaboration with iconic brands like Prada further exemplifies this emotional connection by associating Pirelli with high-stakes, high-visibility events and luxury.

#### 2. Creating "Love marks":

Roberts (2004) suggests that brands should aspire to become "love marks," entities genuinely loved by customers. Pirelli's success goes beyond the quality of its products. The brand has become synonymous with luxury and innovation, extending its influence through innovative partnerships in diverse sectors like sportswear, fashion, and luxury goods. Collaborations with Blossom skis, PUMA, and the Pirelli calendar showcase Pirelli's commitment to creating emotional resonance beyond the conventional boundaries of tire manufacturing.

#### 3. Differentiation Through Emotional Branding:

Kim and Sullivan (2009) highlight the role of emotional branding in addressing the challenge of brand differentiation. Pirelli's differentiation is evident in its ability to transcend the functional stereotype of tires. Despite the utilitarian nature of tires, Pirelli has successfully

crafted a brand narrative that resonates on a deeper emotional level, challenging the notion that emotional branding is reserved for products with traditionally strong emotional ties.

#### 4. Engaging Consumers Through Experiences:

Montaguti and Lelis (2017) emphasize the importance of providing engaging and meaningful experiences. Pirelli's initiatives, such as the transformation of a warehouse into the Hangar Bicocca art centre and the P Zero World stores, demonstrate the brand's commitment to engaging consumers in unique and immersive ways. These initiatives not only reinforce Pirelli's brand values but also offer consumers opportunities for meaningful connections with art and the brand itself.

#### 5. Luxury Co-Branding Activities:

The luxury co-branding activities with Montblanc and Roger Dubuis showcase Pirelli's dedication to reinforcing its premium image. These partnerships extend beyond the realm of tire manufacturing, emphasizing Pirelli's commitment to innovation, manufacturing excellence, and creative design, as highlighted in the literature.

#### 6. Exclusive Experiential Marketing:

The P Zero Experience, an exclusive track day event, aligns with the shift in consumer behaviour noted by Jindal, Jindal, Chavan (2023), focusing on emotional ties with brands. Pirelli provides a 360° brand experience on renowned tracks, creating a sleek and tailored atmosphere that embodies the brand's image and cutting-edge technology. The Pirelli Lounge offers an additional layer of exclusive experiential marketing, allowing guests to relax and be entertained.

### **6. Conclusion**

Pirelli's journey from a tire manufacturer to a luxury brand exemplifies the power of emotional branding and customer experience in transforming a product. By transcending the functional aspects and infusing emotion and luxury into its brand identity, Pirelli demonstrates that successful branding in even the most utilitarian sectors is achievable through creativity, innovation, and strategic partnerships. The case study of Pirelli aligns seamlessly with the foundational concepts discussed in the literature on emotional branding, providing a real-world illustration of how these strategies can be effectively implemented.

In conclusion, Pirelli's case study serves as a compelling real-world example of how emotional branding strategies, as discussed in the literature, can be effectively implemented to transform the perception of a product, in this case, tires, into a brand that elicits consumer loyalty and achieves financial success. The brand's ability to forge emotional connections, differentiate itself, engage consumers through unique experiences, and venture into luxury co-branding activities positions Pirelli as a standout example in the tire industry's extraordinary transformation through emotional branding. Pirelli's success story offers valuable insights for companies seeking to elevate their brands beyond core products, underscoring the pivotal role of emotion and experience in contemporary marketing strategies. The strategies and

innovations employed by Pirelli provide an inspiring model for turning a simple product into a luxury and emotion-driven brand with global appeal.

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